

ESCALANTE AND THE RECOGNITION OF ANCIENT LAKES IN THE GREAT BASIN

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In the fall of 1776 the Franciscan Padre Silvestre Valez de Escalante, traversing the region between the Sevier Lake and the Beaver (Cricket) Mountains in what is now Millard County, Utah, wrote under date of October 2 (Auerbach, 1943:75):

This place, which we named Llano Salado, because we found some thin white shells there, seems to have had a much larger lake than the present one.

On the strength of this single statement Ives (1948) maintained that to Escalante should go the credit for being the first to recognize and record evidence of former "high lake levels" in the Great Basin; moreover, that Escalante's statement "strongly suggests that Stansbury's [1852] discovery was anticipated by nearly three-quarters of a century." Recently Schwarzback (1961:277) has repeated this contention as established fact. To avert further confusion, particularly among those who do not have the Auerbach translation at hand, I believe it is time for a belated re-examination of Ives's postulates. This will involve several bits of admittedly negative evidence, but evidence which Ives totally ignored.

1. As pointed out long ago by Gilbert (1890:224), Escalante did not personally inspect Sevier Lake, relying upon report of the natives as to its existence (cf. Escalante journal, Auerbach translation, p. 74). Could it have been more than a lucky guess that the white shells at Llano Salado represented a former high level of the Sevier? If so, how high a level? There is nothing in the entire Escalante journal to indicate that he had the slightest conception of a lake of the magnitude of the "vast inland sea" of which Stansbury (1852:105) spoke. I use the word 'lucky' in a previous sentence advisedly; some of Escalante's other geographical postulates were less fortunate guesses. It is an interesting postscript to note that it has been suggested (Feth, 1961:110) that the Escalante arm of Lake Bonneville be deleted from maps of the pluvial lakes of the Great Basin.

2. Why is there not the slightest reference in the fairly lengthy Escalante account of Utah valley (Auerbach, 1943:69-71) to the most striking piece of evidence of former high lake levels—the abandoned strand lines on the adjacent Wasatch Mountains? Is it not reasonable to conclude that Escalante either failed to observe the obvious, or having observed the strand lines failed to grasp their significance?

1. Chicago Natural History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

3. While in Utah valley Escalante had been informed by the natives of the existence of a large salt lake to the north. Is it incongruous that a man with the scientific perspicacity with which Ives's would endow him would fail to make the slightest attempt to travel the few leagues (Spanish league = 2.53 miles) to the divide between Utah and Jordan valleys, from which point a clear view of the Great Salt Lake could have been obtained?

Until satisfactory answers to these puzzling questions are forthcoming, I must take the stand that any attempt to suggest that Escalante's remarks forestall the clear-cut, unequivocal statements of Stansbury rests on very shaky foundations. But, as A. N. Whitehead once remarked, "Everything of importance has already been said by someone who did not discover it."

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